

Essenes and Christians

I think the first century Christians are included under the *Essenes* label that Josephus used as a generic label. He uses this label for *the prophets*--the communal group described in the Old Testament. He also uses this label for several individual *seers*--interpreters of dreams. And he uses it as the label for the high priest's breast plate.

Josephus was trying to make the Jews more understandable and more acceptable to his Roman patrons. And that causes him to over simplify and distort. So, for example, in his *Life* he compares the *Pharisees* to the *Stoics*. It is not likely that either group would have acknowledged the accuracy of the comparison.

There are several clues that Josephus was using *Essene* as a generic label, even while he presents it as if it were a proper name. 1. In *Antiquities* 3.7.5 he applies it to the breast plate of the high priest which was used for divination. And he explains that it means *oracle*. 2. He applies it to the communal group in the Old Testament who were known collectively as *the prophets*. 3. He applies it in the singular to individuals who interpret dreams. It is clear enough from the context that this is all he really means by it.

So he uses this label for a thing or a person or a group of persons through which or through whom God delivers messages. *Oracle* was the approximate Roman / Greek equivalent to what is found in Judaism and Christianity.

It is obviously a mis label in the case of the High Priest's breast plate which was properly called *Urim and Thummim*. And it is a mis label for the group who were known as *the prophets*--not the *Essenes*. [1 Samuel 10.10, Jeremiah 23.16 etc.] And this mis-labeling is what has caused the subsequent confusion as to whether there really was such a group as the *Essenes*, unknown to either the Old Testament or the New Testament, which Josephus alone knew about. Josephus was putting a number of things together under one head to make them more comprehensible to the Romans.

It is probable that the 1st century pacifist and communal group which Josephus describes as the *Essenes* was in fact the *Christians*. He may have taken the name from a short notice found in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (5.73) which describes a celibate community west of the Dead Sea by that name. But then he used it indiscriminately as a generic label. [An article by Stephen Goranson of Duke University argues that Pliny's short paragraph is based upon the writing of Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, a Roman governor of Syria circa 15 B.C.]

Which is not to say that Josephus has given us a completely accurate description of the first century Christians. He was living in Rome in a dependent situation and his sources of information for what was happening in Israel were limited, even without taking into account his bias--his desire to make the Jews more presentable to the Romans.

Essenos or *Essaioi*

From the similarities in their accounts, it appears that Josephus had access to the account of the *Essaioi* described by Philo in *Every Good Man is Free* and *Hypothetica*. That is one of the reasons for the assumption that the name *Essaioi* used by Philo is the **same name** as the *Essenos* name used by Josephus. They are obviously the **same group**.

Bishop Lightfoot and others argued that *Essaioi*--Philo's name--and the *Essenos* label used by Josephus were variant forms of the same name--from a hypothetical *Hebrew original*. I don't think they were.

Philo's account shows that he did not invent the Greek word he used: *Essaioi*. Which can be plausibly translated as *followers of Jesus*.

Christians were not called *Christians* at first, and Jewish sources and writers would have resisted adopting the name because it in effect concedes that Jesus was **The Messiah**--the *Christos*--which they continued to deny. [Josephus actually hailed Vespasian as *The Messiah*, in a peculiarly shameless hour.] In Acts 22.4 and 24.14, Paul refers to people of *The Way* to describe the Christians. [cf. 9.2 24.22] In Acts 24.5, the spokesman for the high priest and the Pharisees describes Paul as *a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes*. Acts 11.26 tells us that *in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians*.

Philo was living in Alexandria Egypt when he wrote his account of the *Essaioi*. But he visited Jerusalem in 40 A.D. and he would have gotten information from others who traveled there. Josephus was living in Rome when he wrote his account of the *Essenes*. He apparently had seen Philo's account and would have had other sources of information in cosmopolitan Rome including exiles from Israel. It is possible that he had met Christians or seen early Christian writings. There are some striking parallels.

One clue that the account of Josephus was based upon the account of Philo is that he also estimates their number at *4000*. Since he describes them as raising families and living in many different cities, this figure cannot have been still accurate so many years later, if it was accurate in Philo's time. Their numbers may have been reduced by persecution but they would also have increased from conversion and having children. *Acts* 2.41 4.4 and 6.7 show that the early Christian community was growing rapidly.

The assumption that Josephus put the Christians under the *Essenes* label explains why he wrote nothing about **THE CHRISTIANS** (absent the **HE WAS THE CHRIST** later interpolation) even though he must have been aware of them. Mis-naming explains why **THE ESSENES** abruptly disappeared--why the name disappeared--after the first century, while *Christians* persisted.

It usually happens that the newspaper accounts of controversial movements are never very accurate, even when the reporter is trying to be objective. And that factor would tend to produce discrepancies and distortions in the accounts that Philo and Josephus give. Nonetheless, what they did write seems to be a halfway accurate caricature of the Christians of the first century as we know them from their own accounts.

The accounts of the *Essaioi/Essenos* found in Philo and Josephus show that they: 1. lived in a communal way and shared everything, while avoiding wealth; 2. rejected slavery on principle and had no slaves; 3. refused to take oaths and were pacifists who suffered persecution in the war of 66-70 AD which ended in the destruction of The Temple. There is good reason to suppose that this is a description of the early Christians. It provides supporting evidence that the original Christians were opposed to war, wealth and slavery

See *Church of the Empire* page 59 and 118 for evidence that the non conforming *donatist* Christians of North Africa were still opposing slavery in the 4th century. Their position has been obscured and falsified because the Imperial Church of Constantine, Eusebius and Augustine abandoned the early Christian opposition to war, wealth and slavery. **--Terry Sullivan** September 1st 2015